

3. A NOTE ON THE STATUS OF THE FLYING SQUIRRELS OF DARJEELING AND SIKKIM

Six species of flying squirrels, namely, the Hairy-footed Flying Squirrel, *Belomys pearsoni* (Gray), Lesser Giant Flying Squirrel, *Petaurista elegans* (Muller), Hodgson's Flying Squirrel, *Petaurista magnificus* (Hodgson), Gray's Flying Squirrel, *Petaurista nobilis* (Gray) and Particoloured Flying Squirrel, *Hylotropes alboniger* (Hodgson), are known to occur in the Darjeeling District, West Bengal, and Sikkim. A single example of the Woolly Flying Squirrel, *Eupetaurus cinereus* Thomas, which has until recently been known only from Kashmir, has also been found in Sikkim (Agrawal and Chakraborty, 1970, *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*, 66(3): 615-616). These flying squirrels occur from lower altitudes to approximately 2300 metres. *Petaurista elegans* has, however, been reported at about 3600 metres in Darjeeling district.

From records of the various species till early this century, it would appear that these flying squirrels were in abundance in one or the other place of these hilly terrains. However, during the last few decades, these montane forests, the natural habitat of the flying squirrels, have been denuded by man for extension of human settlements, plantations, terrace cultivations, road construction, ever-increasing pressure of forestry activities (such as large-scale felling of trees for timber, charcoal manufacture, etc.) and collec-

tion of firewood by local people, have limited the forest zone there to its minimum. Consequently, there has been a gradual decline of tall, well-branched suitable trees for their nesting purposes and safety from predations, as well as dearth of plants supplying their natural food, such as fruits, nuts, cones, etc.

In the course of studies on the flying squirrels in Sikkim and Darjeeling District of West Bengal from June 1974 to April 1982, we have noticed that the populations of the Lesser Giant Flying Squirrel, Hodgson's Flying Squirrel, Particoloured Flying Squirrel, Hairy-footed Flying Squirrel, etc. have been greatly depleted. These flying squirrels are now rarely seen, though the Gray's Flying Squirrel is seen in small numbers at altitudes between 1000 and 2300 metres. The main cause for their disappearance from these areas is the wanton destruction of their habitats, obviously affecting their breeding. To some extent their population is also partly affected by unauthorised killing of these animals for their beautiful pelt used in the preparation of jackets, caps, gloves, etc.

It is suggested that immediate investigation should be undertaken to study their exact status and biology for formulating measures for the conservation of these important animals.

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